Making a move from high tech to high art

By Brian Johnson / Correspondent
Friday, February 13, 2004

Resident balances science and opera

It may not be quite the comedic satires of Gilbert and Sullivan that he likes so much, but Watertown resident Dan Kamalic's life might make a pretty good opera.

In the heady days of the dot-com boom of 1999, the then-21-year-old MIT graduate went to work at Akamai Technologies, a Cambridge-based technology firm.

Promising faster, more secure Internet connections, and boasting a staff full of MIT's best and brightest, the company's stock price swooned to an astronomical $327 per share in December 1999, just a couple of months after its initial public offering.

"I keep beating myself up that I had $3 million on paper and couldn't do anything with it," said Kamalic.

Unfortunately, Akamai's fortunes took a devastating turn for the worse. Their client base was 90 percent Internet businesses when most dot-coms went belly up. And Daniel Lewen, the company's chief technology officer and founding partner, was killed aboard American Airlines Flight 11 on Sept. 11, 2001.

When Kamalic left the company in October 2002, the stock was trading at 97 cents.

While most would be consumed by the thought of losing millions, Kamalic maintained his equilibrium. Luckily, he has more than one career to fall back on.

At 26 years old, with his messy hair, red and blue T-shirt and baggy corduroys, Kamalic could pass for either a young Bill Gates or one of the thousands of students at Boston University.

However, he is not a student; he is a systems analyst for the School of Bio Engineering, working on a Whitaker grant to help expand BU's life science facilities. Kamalic is helping to design a state-of-the-art computer lab for the school's new building, opening soon.

And when that day is done, he goes to his second job, singing opera. Currently, Kamalic is in rehearsal for The New England Light Opera's "The (In)complet works of Gilbert and Sullivan," playing this month at the Boston University Tsai Center.

This past December, Kamalic finished the final requirements for a degree from the New England Conservatory of Music. As a singer, Kamalic has performed all over New England, with the Granite State Opera, the Cape Cod Opera, the Thames Valley Opera, the Longwood Opera and the Lowell Opera.
"Dan has a lovely voice, a lot of color and potential," said Mark Morgan, his director at NELO, "He was one of the tops in auditions for this show."

Born in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, Kamalic's mother, Linda, saw him playing around on the piano and started lessons for the 11-year old.

Kamalic credits his mother, a speech pathologist by trade, with making sure he didn't have a Brooklyn accent.

"All my relatives sound like Fran Drescher," he said. His father, Ivan Nino Kamalic, is a painter/sculpture who owns a gallery in Rockport.

Though Kamalic claims he hated the piano, his teacher spoke to his mother and soon he was taking voice lessons, and excelling.

As a teenager, Kamalic discovered a love of opera listening to the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, the 19th-century author and composer team who wrote "The Pirates of Penzance," "HMS Pinafore" and "The Gondoliers," among others.

When it came time for college, Kamalic had a decision to make: singing or science.

However, when he visited MIT in Cambridge and found out the school had a Gilbert and Sullivan troupe, he was convinced he could have both.

And he has ever since. When asked about his dual passions, Kamalic insists he enjoys the balancing act of his day job.

"Everybody has two sides of their brain," he said.

That's a point agreed upon by Morgan, the artistic director of NELO, who said the presence of a scientific mind meshes well with music.

"There are a lot of people in the highest levels of music who are scientists and mathematicians," said Morgan, "of course, not many singers."

Kamalic said that he derives strength and confidence in performing in part from his time at MIT.

"I think the brutal method of education at MIT made me think I can handle anything," said Kamalic. "When I go into a gig, I will say to myself I'm not afraid of this. I know if I can handle the pressure of being a scientist, I can handle anything."

However, he still keeps his dual careers a secret until he gets to know people.

"If you tell a fellow performer you're a singer and a scientist, they'll think 'He must not be a very serious singer,' and the other way around," said Kamalic.

When asked if the Metropolitan Opera comes calling, would he drop the scientist gig? Kamalic said he would jump at the chance. However, he added, excited about the possibilities, "I could still telecommute."

As for Akamai, Kamalic said some good things did happen. He was able to give some of the shares he couldn't cash in to his grandfather, who made a bundle. And the severance package helped Kamalic and his fiancé, Liane Grasso, buy a condo in Watertown last April.

"The (In)compleat works of Gilbert and Sullivan" will be performed Friday, Feb. 20, and Saturday, Feb. 21, 8 p.m., at Boston University's Tsai Center, 685 Commonwealth Ave., and Sunday, Feb. 22, 3 p.m., at Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield.